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the SANDMAN™

CONVERGENCE

SUGGESTED FOR MATURE READERS

written by
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illustrated by
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ANNO DOMINI 1273.

A SENSE OF MOUNTING PANIC RISES IN MARCO'S CHEST.

A LOW WIND HAS RISEN, AND THE SAND STINGS HIS LEGS EVEN THROUGH THE LEGGINGS. A *THOUSAND TINY KNIVES*, HE THINKS.

THE VOICES: THEY MUST BE JUST ACROSS THE NEXT DUNE...

THE CARAVAN: HIS FATHER, HIS UNCLE. HE HEARD THEM CALLING HIM.

NOTHING.

THE SAND IS SOFT BENEATH HIS FEET.

HE STUMBLES AND SLIDES DOWN A DUNE, HANDS AWKWARDLY GRABBING AT THE FINE ROCK POWDER, FINDING NO GRIP.

HE TRULY PANICS THEN. HIS MOUTH OPENS AND HE CALLS OUT, HIS VOICE RASPING ON THE DESERT WIND.

Soft Places

Neil Gaiman: Storia
John Watkiss: Disegni e Chine
Todd Klein: Lettering
Daniel Vozzo: Colori
Alisa Kwitney: Ass. Redattore
Karen Berger: Redattore

SAND ENTERS HIS MOUTH.

HE COUGHS, BRIEFLY CHOKES, THEN, HIS EYES WATERING, HE HAWKS AND SPITS INTO THE SAND, REGRETTING THE LOSS OF FLUID EVEN AS HE DOES SO.

HE HAS A SKIN TWO-THIRDS FULL OF BRACKISH WATER. ENOUGH FOR PERHAPS TWO DAYS, IF HE IS PRUDENT.

IT OCCURS TO HIM THEN THAT THE VOICES HE HEARD MAY HAVE BEEN NO MORE THAN ILLUSIONS, BROUGHT ABOUT BY THIRST AND HUNGER.

THE WIND RISES.

THE SKY TURNS THE LIVID COLOR OF AN OLD BRUISE.

THE WORLD IS SAND FROM DESERT FLOOR TO SKY: MARCO COVERS HIS FACE WITH HIS ROBE, BREATHES IN TINY SHALLOW BURSTS, CROUCHED AGAINST THE SIDE OF THE DUNE.

HE HEARS NOTHING BUT THE HISS OF SAND; TASTES NOTHING BUT SAND; HIS NOSTRILS CAKE WITH SAND; THE CORNERS OF HIS EYES CLOG IN THE DARKNESS.

IN THE NOTHING WORLD OF PAIN AND NOISE HE PONDERS HIS OWN DEATH; AND IF IT IS TO END HERE, WELL, HE HAS TRAVELLED FURTHER THAN MOST, AYE AND AT A YOUNGER AGE; BUT THERE ARE SUCH CITIES STILL TO SEE...

THE STORM SEEMS TO GO ON FOR A THOUSAND YEARS.

THEN WARMTH

AND SILENCE

AND SLEEP.

HE KNUCKLES THE SAND FROM THE CORNER OF HIS EYES (REMEMBERING AS HE DOES SO A TALE HIS MOTHER TOLD HIM, IN THE VENICE OF HIS CHILDHOOD) --

"THERE'S A MAGIC MAN AS COMES TO YOU WHEN IT'S TIME FOR YOU TO SLEEP. HE'S TALL AND PALE, AND HIS CLOTHES ARE EVERY COLOR OF THE RAINBOW. HE CARRIES A BAG OF MAGIC SAND BY HIS SIDE.

"YOU CAN'T SEE HIM, MARCO, BUT HE CAN SEE YOU."

HE THROWS THE MAGIC SAND INTO YOUR EYES. AND THAT'S WHAT SENDS YOU OFF TO DREAMLAND.

THAT'S THE SAND YOU FIND IN YOUR EYES WHEN YOU WAKE.

(PATTERNS: HE ALMOST GRASPS THE PATTERNS, AND THEN HE SHAKES THE LAST OF THE SAND FROM HIS CLOAK, AND THE PATTERNS HAVE GONE.)

THE LANDSCAPE HAS CHANGED NOW, RE-SCULPTED BY THE WIND.

IT IS SILENT. THERE ARE NO WINDS, NO SANDSTORMS. THE SAND IS SMOOTH AS THE SKY.

MARCO STUMBLES DOWN IN THE CHILL OF WAKING, LEAVES SCUMBLED FOOTPRINTS IN HIS WAKE.

HE CAN SEE WHERE HE'S BEEN. BUT THERE IS NOTHING TO INDICATE HIS FUTURE PATH, AND HE HESITATES.

♪ I'LL BE GLAD ♪ WHEN YOU'RE DEAD, YOU RASCAL YOU...

THE MUSIC ECHOES IN SNATCHES ACROSS THE SILENT SAND.

IN HIS HEAD, OR OUT OF IT? HE CANNOT TELL.

♪ WON'T YOU COME ♪♪ HOME, BILL BAILEY, WON'T YOU COME HOME...

♪ HOW YA GONNA KEEP 'EM DOWN ON ♪ THE FARM, AFTER THEY'VE SEEN PAREEEE...

A HUNDRED DIFFERENT VOICES ECHO. WORDS BLUR. THE WATER IS SOUR IN HIS MOUTH.

ONCE I BUILT A RAILROAD; NOW IT'S DONE. BROTHER CAN YOU SPARE A...

REMEMBER THAT THE CITY IS A FUNNY PLACE, SOMETHING LIKE A CIRCUS OR A SEWER...

...ANY VIEW OF THINGS THAT IS NOT STRANGE IS FALSE...

AND THEN THROUGH THE BABBLE HE HEARS IT: A VOICE, DEEP, CALLING HIS NAME.

MARCO! HO, MARCO!

FATHER?

WAIT, FATHER! I'M COMING!

FATHER?

I'M NOT YOUR FATHER, LADDIE. BUT SPEAK, WHO ARE YOU, AND WHERE ARE YOU BOUND, IN THIS GODFORSAKEN WASTE?

I WAS LOOKING FOR MY FATHER, MY UNCLE... THEIR CARAVAN. WE GOT SEPARATED SOMEHOW...

BUT HOW DID YOU COME TO THE DESERT? WHERE ARE YOUR PEOPLE?

I HAVE NO PEOPLE. AS TO HOW I GOT HERE...

WELL...

DO YOU KNOW, I'M NOT SURE. I WAS IN A PRISON CELL IN GENOA, AND EVERYTHING WENT SO STRANGE. I CALLED MARCO...

THAT'S MY NAME.

HE'S MUCH OLDER THAN YOU, MY CELL-MATE. MARCO MILLIONS. THAT'S WHAT THEY CALL HIM.

MESSIRE... MARCO... MILLIONS...

BRR. IT'S GETTING CHILLY. SO, LADDIE: WHERE IS THIS PLACE?

THIS IS THE DESERT OF LOP.

HMM. NO, DON'T SAY ANYTHING ELSE.

I HAVE IT!

I FORGET NOTHING. LISTEN TO THIS...

"THE DESERT OF LOP..."

"BIRDS AND BEASTS THERE ARE NONE, IN THIS DESERT, BECAUSE THEY FIND NOTHING TO EAT. BUT I ASSURE YOU A VERY STRANGE THING IS FOUND HERE WHICH I SHALL RELATE TO YOU.

"THE TRUTH IS THIS.

"WHEN A MAN IS RIDING BY NIGHT THROUGH THIS DESERT AND SOME THINGS HAPPEN TO MAKE HIM LOITER OR LOSE TOUCH WITH HIS COMPANIONS, BY DROPPING ASLEEP, OR FOR SOME OTHER REASON, AND AFTERWARDS HE WANTS TO REJOIN THEM, THEN HE HEARS SPIRITS TALKING AND WILL SUPPOSE THEM TO BE HIS COMPANIONS.

"SOMETIMES INDEED THEY EVEN HAIL HIM BY NAME. OFTEN THESE VOICES MAKE HIM STRAY FROM THE PATH, SO THAT HE NEVER FINDS IT AGAIN. AND IN THIS WAY MANY TRAVELERS HAVE STRAYED AND PERISHED."

"SOMETIMES IN THE NIGHT THEY ARE CONSCIOUS OF A NOISE LIKE THE CLATTER OF A GREAT CAVALCADE OF RIDERS AWAY FROM THE ROAD; AND BELIEVING THAT THESE ARE OF THEIR OWN COMPANY, THEY GO WHERE THEY HEAR THE NOISE, AND WHEN DAY BREAKS, FIND THEY ARE VICTIMS OF AN ILLUSION AND IN AN AWKWARD PLIGHT.

"AND THERE ARE SOME WHO, IN CROSSING THIS DESERT HAVE SEEN A HOST OF MEN COMING TOWARDS THEM, AND, SUSPECTING THAT THEY WERE ROBBERS, HAVE TAKEN FLIGHT; SO HAVING LEFT THE BEATEN TRACK AND NOT KNOWING HOW TO RETURN TO IT, THEY HAVE GONE HOPELESSLY ASTRAY.

"EVEN BY DAYLIGHT MEN HEAR THESE SPIRIT VOICES. OFTEN YOU FANCY YOU CAN HEAR THE STRAINS OF MANY MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS, ESPECIALLY THE SOUND OF DRUMS, AND THE CLASH OF ARMS.

"FOR THIS REASON TRAVELLERS MAKE A POINT OF KEEPING CLOSE TOGETHER. BEFORE THEY GO TO SLEEP AT NIGHT THEY SET UP A SIGN POINTING IN THE DIRECTION THEY HAVE TO TRAVEL. AND THEY FASTEN LITTLE BELLS AROUND ALL THEIR BEASTS, SO THAT THEY MAY PREVENT THEM FROM STRAYING FROM THE PATH.

"THUS IT IS THAT THE DESERT IS CROSSED."

THERE! WORD FOR WORD OR NEAR AS DAMN IT.

WHAT WAS THAT?

IT'S FROM THE ACCOUNT OF THE TRAVELS OF MY CELL-MATE, AS RENDERED BY ME--

--RUSTICHELLO OF PISA. IT'S A DESCRIPTION OF THE WORLD. HE'S SEEN IT *ALL*, YOU SEE. MARCO POLO. *HE'S* SEEN THE WORLD. *I* JUST WRITE IT DOWN.

MARCO POLO?

THAT'S *ME*.

OF COURSE! I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN. I'M DREAMING. THAT'S WHAT'S HAPPENING, YOUNG MARCO. I'M DREAMING.

SO I'M DREAMING TOO?

OF COURSE NOT. YOU'RE JUST SOMETHING IN MY DREAM.

OH. I DON'T FEEL LIKE SOMETHING IN A DREAM.

LOOK. WE CAN'T BOTH BE DREAMING, SO I'M AFRAID IT'S DEFINITELY YOU.

WELL, NOT TO WORRY. DREAMS SHOULDN'T WORRY.

LET'S GO AND FIND SOMEWHERE COMFORTABLE TO WAIT UNTIL WE WAKE. IT'S SO RARE TO REALIZE THAT YOU'RE DREAMING WHEN YOU ARE.

MAYBE WE'LL MEET SOME WOMEN.

TAKE IT FROM ME, LAD. THE WORST THING ABOUT BEING IN PRISON IS HAVING TO SMUGGLE IN GENOESE WHORES.

NOW, LET'S FIND SOME COMPANY.

LISTEN, OLD MAN. THIS IS THE DESERT OF LOP. IT'S THE MOST DESERTED SPOT ON GOD'S EARTH. WE AREN'T GOING TO FIND ANY COMPANY HERE.

I HAVE TO FIND MY FATHER. I HAVE TO FIND THE CARAVAN.

NO. YOU LISTEN. YOU WENT THROUGH THE DESERT OF LOP ON YOUR WAY TO SHANGTU, WHAT, TWENTY, THIRTY YEARS AGO NOW?

YOU'VE NO REASON TO WORRY...

WHAT AM I DOING? I'M ARGUING WITH A DREAM.

OR I AM.

IT'S GETTING COLD.

AH. WELL, THERE'S A FIRE OVER THERE. LET'S GO AND SIT DOWN.

A FIRE? IT MUST BE MY FATHER'S CARAVAN. YOU'LL SEE.

HOLA! COME AND SIT DOWN, FRIENDS. COME AND WARM YOURSELVES.

SEE? WHAT DID I TELL YOU? IT'S A DREAM.

HAIL, STRANGER.

HOOM. COME AND WARM YOURSELF UP. IT CAN GET COLD, HERE IN THE SOFT PLACES.

MESSIRE, HAVE YOU WINE?

WINE! A RUBY RED BEAUJOLAIS! A SWEET, TOPAZ-COLORED TOKAY! WHAT A WONDERFUL IDEA!

INDEED, WE WILL DRINK WINE, AND YOU WILL TELL ME YOUR STORIES. AND PERHAPS OTHER TRAVELLERS, EQUALLY AS CONGENIAL, WILL ARRIVE, AND WE WILL ENTERTAIN THEM, TOO.

EXCUSE ME, SIR. MY FATHER, AND MY UNCLE. NICOLO AND MAFFEO POLO. THEY ARE WITH A CARAVAN. THEY ARE TRADERS, MERCHANTS.

HAVE YOU SEEN THEM?

I HAVEN'T SEEN ANYONE. I CAME OUT TO THE SOFT PLACES TO THINK. TO GET AWAY FROM MYSELF.

YOU *REALLY* HAVE WINE?

SIR. WHAT KIND OF A TRAVELLER WOULD I BE WITHOUT WINE?

LET ME SEE.

HOOM... A STUB OF A TRAIN TICKET, A CHALK, A BROWN PAPER BAG. HMPGH. SEE WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU LEAVE AND GO SOMEWHERE ELSE? A PACKET OF JELLY-BABIES...

AHH. ***WINE.*** AND TANKARDS.

SIR, FORGIVE ME FOR ASKING. BUT-- ARE YOU A DREAM?

OH YES.

SEE?

SO, MY FRIEND. WE HAVE THE WINE. WHEN DO WE GET FEMALE COMPANY? I ACHE FOR THE JOYS OF LOVE.

BLESS MY SOUL, NO. I'M TRYING TO GET ***AWAY*** FROM ALL THAT.

THE ONLY REASON I'M ***OUT*** HERE IS BECAUSE THEY KEEP COMING FOR ***WALKS*** IN ME. ***LONG*** ONES. GAZING INTO EACH OTHER'S EYES. WHISPERING SWEET AND (TO BE FRANK) RATHER EMBARRASSING NOTHINGS.

SO I'VE TAKEN AN EVENING OFF.

I'M SORRY?

MY LORD, AND HIS NEW WOMAN. I'VE GOT NOTHING AGAINST ***WOMEN***. OR ***LOVE***. BUT, WELL. IT'S ***EMBARRASSING***. ENOUGH OF THAT.

SO WHO ARE ***YOU***, LAD? WHAT'S ***YOUR*** STORY?

MY NAME IS MARCO POLO.

AH. Y'KNOW, SOMEHOW I THOUGHT IT MIGHT BE.

WHEN I WAS... VERY YOUNG...MY FATHER AND MY UNCLE WERE TRAVELLING IN CONSTANTINOPLE.

AS WARS BROKE OUT BEHIND THEM, THEY WERE FORCED TO CONTINUE ON TO THE EAST INTO UNCHARTED TERRITORY.

EVENTUALLY THEY REACHED THE COURT OF THE GREAT KING. KUBILAI KHAN HIMSELF, IN FAR CATHAY.

NOW, WHILE THE KHAN HIMSELF WAS A HEATHEN AND AN IDOLATER, HE LOOKED KINDLY UPON THE CHRISTIAN FAITH.

MY FATHER WISHED TO CONVERT THE KHAN TO THE TRUE FAITH--AND THUS CONVERT ALL HIS EMPIRE, WHICH EXTENDS FROM THE LANDS OF NIGHT IN THE NORTH TO THE UTTERMOST ISLANDS OF THE EAST.

IMAGINE HOW MANY WOULD BE DRAWN INTO THE FAITH AT A STROKE, WHAT THAT WOULD DO TO THE WORLD...

"BUT THE KHAN HAS IDOLATER PRIESTS, WHO WORK MIRACLES FOR HIM. THEY ENSURE THAT IT IS ALWAYS SUMMER ABOVE HIS PALACE, THOUGH IT RAINS AND STORMS NEARBY.

"THEY CAUSE HIS FOOD AND WINE TO FLY INTO HIS HAND, SO NEVER A DROP IS SPILLED, AND NEVER A MAN TOUCHES THEM.

"'LOOK AT THEM,' SAID THE KHAN TO MY FATHER. "THEY HAVE POWER EVEN I FEAR.'

"'SO THIS I SAY: GO BACK TO YOUR POPE AND TELL HIM TO SEND ME ONE HUNDRED CHRISTIAN MIRACLE WORKERS, WHO WILL SHOW MY PRIESTS THAT YOUR CHRIST CAN WORK MIRACLES AS GREAT AS THOSE OF THEIR GAUTAMA BUDDHA.'"

GOOD GRACIOUS. SO WHAT HAPPENED?

WELL, THEY CAME BACK. I WAS FIFTEEN. I CAN'T HAVE BEEN MORE THAN FOUR WHEN THEY LEFT.

=MUUUURP.= FRIEND? HAVE YOU MORE WINE?

BUT THE POPE WAS DEAD, AND NO NEW POPE WAS CHOSEN. THEY WAITED FOR TWO YEARS FOR A POPE. THEN WHEN GREGORY WAS ELECTED, HE POINTED OUT HE DIDN'T HAVE A HUNDRED MIRACLE WORKERS. HE DIDN'T HAVE ONE.

THERE'S A TERRIBLY NICE FRANCISCAN IN SEVENTEENTH CENTURY ASSISI WHO CAN FLY. IQ OF SIXTY, AND PERHAPS A LITTLE TOO HEAVILY INTO SELF-MUTILATION, BUT HE CAN HONESTLY FLY.

SAINT JOSEPH OF COPERTINO. BIT AFTER YOUR TIME. HOOM. SORRY. PRAY CONTINUE.

"EVENTUALLY, WHEN I WAS SIXTEEN, WE SET OFF WITH TWO ELDERLY DOMINICAN PRIESTS."

"COULD *THEY* DO MIRACLES?"

"WELL, NOT SO YOU'D NOTICE. ONE OF THEM HAD A LITTLE THING HE DID WITH A CUP AND SOME BALLS, BUT IT WASN'T VERY IMPRESSIVE. THEY BOTH GAVE UP BEFORE WE REACHED SYRIA.

"THEY GOT SCARED. WE WENT ON."

WE'VE BEEN TRAVELLING FOR ALMOST TWO YEARS, NOW. AND KUBILAI KHAN HIMSELF WAITS ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THIS DESERT.

I HAVE SEEN *SUCH* CITIES...

YES! THAT WAS YOUR GENIUS!

BEING ABLE TO ***DESCRIBE*** CITIES. NOT JUST THE LAND, OR THE TRADE, BUT THE ***SOUL*** OF THE CITY. WHAT MADE IT ***UNIQUELY*** ITSELF...

KUBILAI KHAN STAYED IN HIS SUMMER PALACE IN SUMMER, AND HIS WINTER PALACE IN WINTER, LIKE A SPIDER, EDGING FROM ONE SIDE OF THE WEB TO ANOTHER.

AND *YOU* WENT OUT TO ALL THE CITIES IN HIS EMPIRE AND CAME HOME AND DESCRIBED THEM TO HIM.

UUURP. I KNOW THE STORY, YOU SEE. I'M WRITING IT ALL DOWN FOR YOU. SO IT'LL BE REMEMBERED.

SIR? I'M HUNGRY. HAVE YOU ANY FOOD?

HOOM. FOOD. LET'S SEE WHAT WE CAN MANAGE.

WELL, THERE ARE JELLY BABIES. A BIT STICKY, BUT QUITE PALATABLE.

AND--GOOD LORD--SANDWICHES! I DO BELIEVE--YES!--CHEESE AND PICKLE.

HERE YOU GO.

GREAT LORD. MAY WE SPEAK TO YOU?

HOOM. I DON'T SEE WHY NOT.

WE SEEK THE TRUE WORLD. SOME OF US HAVE BEEN SEARCHING FOR MANY THOUSANDS OF YEARS. BUT THE TRUE WORLD IS NO CLOSER. WE RIDE AND RIDE...

I FEAR YOUR BUSINESS IS NOT WITH ME, FRIEND, BUT WITH MY MASTER.

"OTHERS CLAIM THAT WE WOULD RETURN TO THE WORLD ON THE DAY WE LEFT IT, AND LIVE OUT THE SPAN OF OUR LIVES --

"AND ALL THE TIME WE SPENT IN THIS PLACE WOULD FADE AND VANISH, LIKE A DAWN DREAM ON WAKING THAT COLORS THE DAY BUT CANNOT BE TOUCHED OR REMEMBERED."

SIR? IF WE EVER RETURNED TO THE HARD LANDS, THERE ARE SOME AMONGST US WHO BELIEVE THAT WE WOULD DIE OF OLD AGE, CRUMBLING TO DUST LIKE THE MEN IN THE TALES.

WHICH WOULD IT BE, SIR?

WHICH WOULD IT BE?

I WISH I KNEW.

AYE. SO DO WE, LORD.

COME! LET US RIDE.

ARE THEY DREAMS, TOO?

OH, YES. AFTER THEIR FASHION.

BUT THEN, WE ARE ALL DREAMS, IN OUR FASHION.

I'M NOT.

SIR? WHAT IS THIS PLACE?

HERE? HOOM. I THOUGHT I'D TOLD YOU THAT ALREADY. YOU'RE IN ONE OF THE SOFT PLACES.

THERE WERE MORE OF THEM, IN THE OLDEN DAYS.

I REMEMBER, WHEN I WAS JUST A YOUNG VICINITY, THERE WERE SOFT PLACES EVERYWHERE. WELL, NOT EVERYWHERE. BUT THEY WERE A SIGHT MORE COMMON THAN NOW.

EVEN IN YOUR TIME THEY WERE MORE COMMON THAN THEY ARE TODAY. SOMETIMES I THINK THAT THEIR LOSS IS YOUR FAULT.

MY FAULT?

YOURS, HWEN T'SANG'S, IBN BATTUTA'S... THE LOT OF YOU. THE EXPLORERS, AND THE ONES WHO CAME AFTER YOU, WHO FROZE THE WORLD INTO RIGID PATTERNS.

YOU'RE TALKING AS IF WE'RE DEAD, MAN. DEAD AND CRUMBLED TO DUST.

THAT'S WHAT YOU ARE. TO ME. YOU'RE HISTORY. BOTH OF YOU. SEVEN HUNDRED YEARS' GONE.

TIME AT THE EDGE OF THE DREAMING IS SOFTER THAN ELSEWHERE, AND HERE IN THE SOFT PLACES IT LOOPS AND WHORLS ON ITSELF.

IN THE SOFT PLACES WHERE THE BORDER BETWEEN DREAMS AND REALITY IS ERODED, OR HAS NOT YET FORMED...

"TIME. IT'S LIKE THROWING A STONE INTO A POOL. IT CASTS *RIPPLES*.

"HOOM. *THAT'S* WHERE WE ARE."

HERE.

IN THE *SOFT* PLACES, WHERE THE *GEOGRAPHIES OF DREAM* INTRUDE UPON THE REAL. COULD I HAVE YOUR *TANKARDS*, PLEASE?

THERE AREN'T *MANY* LEFT IN MY TIME -- THIS PLACE IS STILL SOFT. THAT'S HOW COME WE CAN ALL BE HERE TOGETHER.

IN *MY* DAY--THAT'S 1992--THIS PART OF THE DESERT IS KNOWN AS *TAKLAMAKAN*. THAT'S TURKIK FOR "*IF YOU GO IN, YOU WON'T COME OUT AGAIN.*" GOOD, EH?

THIS IS... *THE SOFT PLACE?*

NOT THE *ONLY* ONE.

THERE'S A FEW THOUSAND SQUARE MILES OF CENTRAL AUSTRALIA, A COUPLE OF PACIFIC ISLANDS, A FIELD IN IRELAND, AN OCCASIONAL MOUNTAIN IN ARIZONA...

AN OCCASIONAL MOUNTAIN?

IT'S NOT A VERY BIG MOUNTAIN, BUT IT'S ONLY THERE OCCASIONALLY.

ARE THERE *REALLY* SUCH PLACES?

HAVE YOU EVER HEARD OF FIDDLER'S GREEN, MARCO? THE PARADISE ON EARTH THAT *SOME* SAY ALL SAILORS DREAM OF FINDING?

NO.

PITY.

GOOD MEETING YOU GENTLEMEN. AND THAT'S *FIDDLER'S GREEN*. LIKE THE COLOR.

PERHAPS YOU COULD MENTION IT IN ONE OF *YOUR STORIES*, MESSIRE RUSTICHELLO?

MESSIRE RUSTICHELLO. MESSIRE POLO.

GOODBYE.

HEY. THANKS FOR THE WINE.

WHAT A *NICE* MAN. I WONDER WHERE HE WENT?

MM. HE WENT WHEREVER OLD DREAMS GO, I'D IMAGINE. OFF TO *DREAM-LAND*.

YOU'LL JOIN HIM SOON, AND YOU CAN FIND OUT THEN. *I'LL* WAKE UP, AND *YOU'LL* BE GONE WHERE DREAMS GO.

I'M *NOT* A DREAM.

OH, YOU'RE A DREAM ALL RIGHT. ONLY QUESTION IS *WHOSE*. I THINK YOU'RE *MINE*. BUT MAYBE I'M WRONG.

HEY, BOY. WHO'S DREAMING *YOU*?

FOR THE LAST TIME, NOBODY'S...

MESSIRE RUSTICHELLO?

MESSIRE RUSTICHELLO!

SIR? I AM LOST HERE. I MET PEOPLE, BUT THEY HAVE ALL GONE NOW. CAN YOU HELP?

ARE YOU A DREAM AS WELL?

Yes.

Yes, I am Dream.

I fear, however, that I am in no position to help you. I have just freed myself from captivity...

I have just chastised...my captor...

I am so weak. I have been away so long. I must return to my castle...

I HAVE SOME WATER LEFT. DO YOU NEED WATER?

I...I thank you.

SIR? ARE YOU THE LORD OF THIS PLACE?

Indeed.

I MET A MAN, IN THIS PLACE, WHO SPOKE OF A LAND CALLED FIDDLER'S GREEN. HE SAID YOU WERE IN LOVE. THAT YOU WENT WALKING ALL THE TIME WITH YOUR WOMAN...

Did he say who the woman was?

I DON'T REMEMBER. I'M SORRY.

It is not important. It has happened already, or it is still to come. And forewarned is seldom forearmed. Not even in the shifting zones.

THE MAN I MENTIONED, HE SAID THIS WAS CALLED A SOFT PLACE.

Yes. That is a valid name. The soft places of the world. The shifting places...

The...

YOU LOOK TERRIBLE. WHITE AS THE MAN IN THE MOON. ARE YOU ALWAYS SO PALE?

That depends on who's watching.

SORRY?

No matter.

I thank you for the water, young man. I will be on my way.

SIR, CAN YOU TELL ME HOW TO GET BACK? HOW TO RETURN TO MY FATHER, TO HIS CARAVAN? TO THE DESERT OF LOP?

No.

BUT SIR--

You come in, you do not go out again.

BUT... THEY *SAID*. THEY *SAID* I'D GET OUT. THE FAT MAN, AND THE OTHER MAN, RUSTICHELLO, THEY *SAID* I'D GET OUT. THEY SAID I'D GO *HOME*.

I DON'T WANT TO BE *TRAPPED* HERE *FOREVER*.

I can appreciate that.

Hm. Rustichello? The fantasist? You're Marco Polo.

YES.

I see.

Yes. You are trapped. I know how that feels.

You gave me water. And I am not ungrateful. However, I am very weak. And if I help you, I may not be able to help myself...

Marco?

YES?

Yes, I'll send you back. You will even see your home again. You will have to go the long way, though.

And you do not know how fortunate you are.

I DO.

No.

You don't.

AS THE SAND FELL INTO HIS HAND, MARCO HEARD THE RUMBLE OF DISTANT THUNDER.

STORMS ARE COMING, HE THOUGHT, AS IF FROM A LONG WAY OFF.

HE FOUND HIMSELF ABLE TO SEE EACH FALLING GRAIN, DISTINCT AND UNIQUE; AND HE KNEW THEN THAT HE WAS TRULY DREAMING.

THERE ARE REALLY PATTERNS. IT WAS A REVELATION, OF A KIND.

DREAMS AND SAND AND STORIES. DESERTS AND CITIES AND TIME.

THE GRAINS FELL SLOWLY, TUMBLING DOWN FROM THE DREAM-KING'S PALE FINGERS INTO HIS OWN TRAVEL-STAINED HANDS.

THE PATTERNS THEY FORMED AS THEY FELL ILLUMINATED HIS MIND: A LANDSCAPE STROBED BY FLASHES OF DISTANT LIGHTNING.

I'LL NEVER FORGET THIS, HE THOUGHT, TRIUMPHANTLY. *I'LL NEVER FORGET WHAT I'VE LEARNED HERE...*

BUT HIS WORLD WENT DARK AND SOFT AND NOWHERE; AND MARCO PLUNGED DOWN WITH IT...

Ching Ching Ching

HE HEARS THE JINGLING OF LITTLE BELLS. A HORSE. YES.

THEN STRONG HANDS PULLING HIM OUT OF THE SAND...

MARCO! WE THOUGHT WE'D LOST YOU FOR GOOD. ARE YOU ALL RIGHT, LADDIE?

CHRIST'S WOUNDS! YOU CAN'T HAVE BEEN MORE THAN A HUNDRED FEET FROM US, ALL THE TIME.

I... CAME BACK...

YOU HAD US WORRIED.

WE HEARD SUCH STRANGE THINGS LAST NIGHT, BOY. IT SEEMED LIKE A HORDE OF MEN WAS RIDING PAST, ALTHOUGH WE SAW NOTHING. DREAMS AND ILLUSIONS BREED IN THIS DAMNED PLACE.

FATHER?

YES?

I HAVE TO TELL YOU ABOUT THE PATTERNS.

PATTERNS?

I...

I'M SORRY, NOTHING. A DREAM... I HAD A DREAM...

I DON'T KNOW. IT'S GONE NOW. I DON'T REMEMBER.

WELL, COME AND EAT. WE SET OFF AGAIN IN AN HOUR.

IN FUTURE, YOU MUST IGNORE THE ILLUSIONS. THEY'RE NO MORE THAN DREAMS, AND OF AS LITTLE IMPORTANCE AS THAT. THEY NEARLY KILLED YOU, MARCO. DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?

YES, FATHER.

THUS IT IS THAT THE DESERT IS CROSSED.

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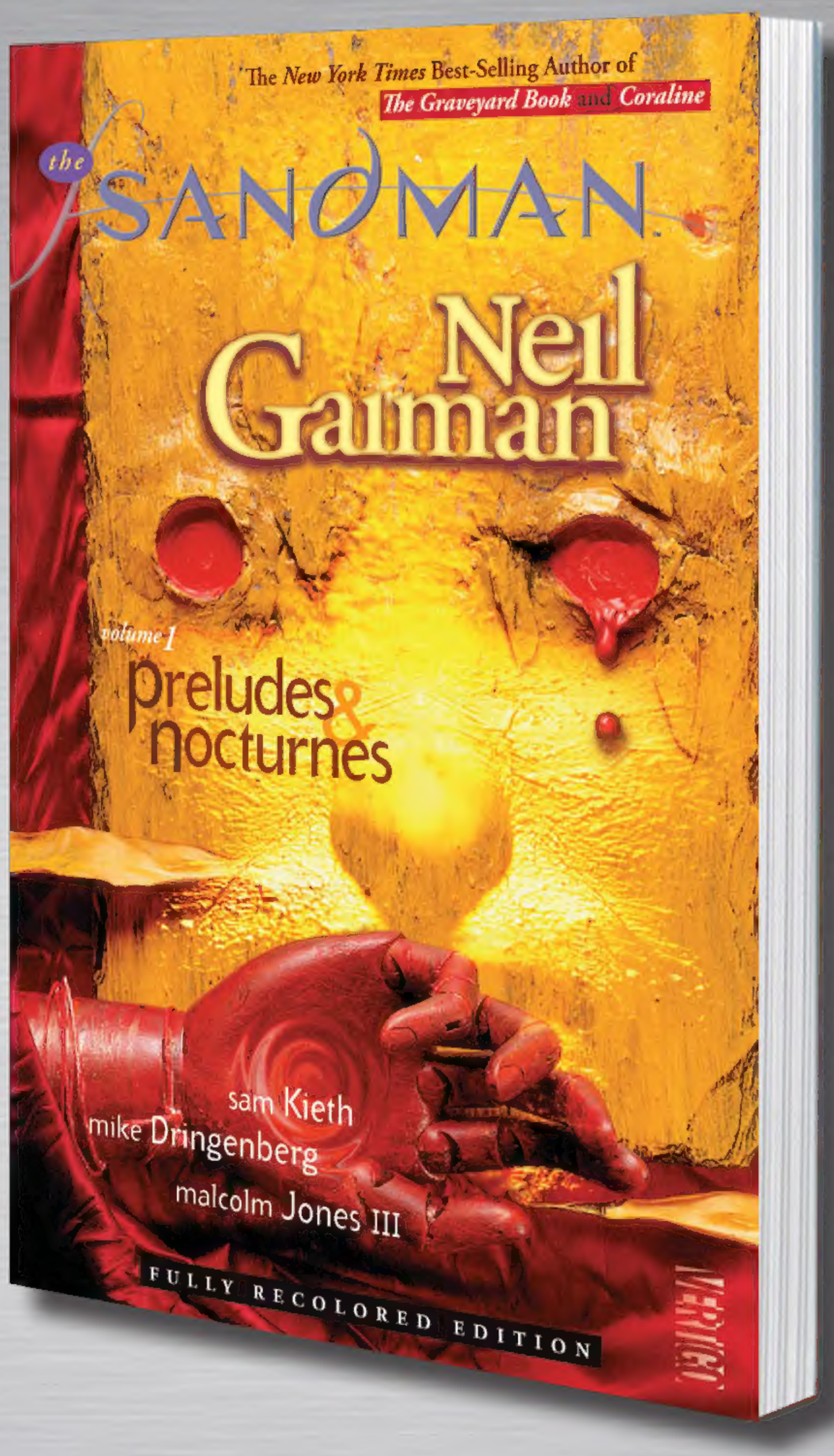
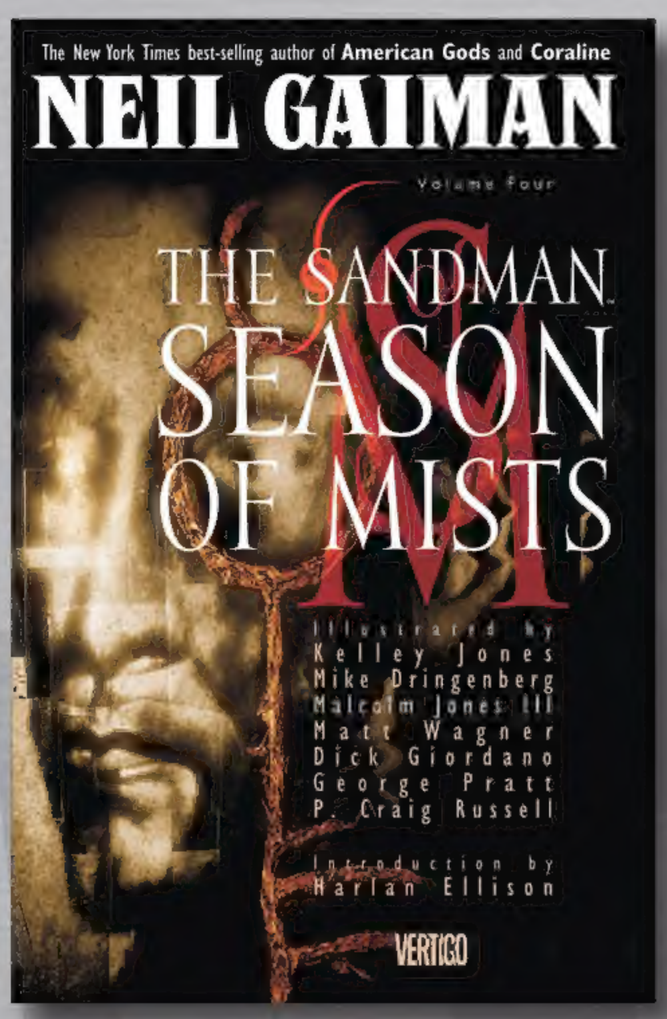
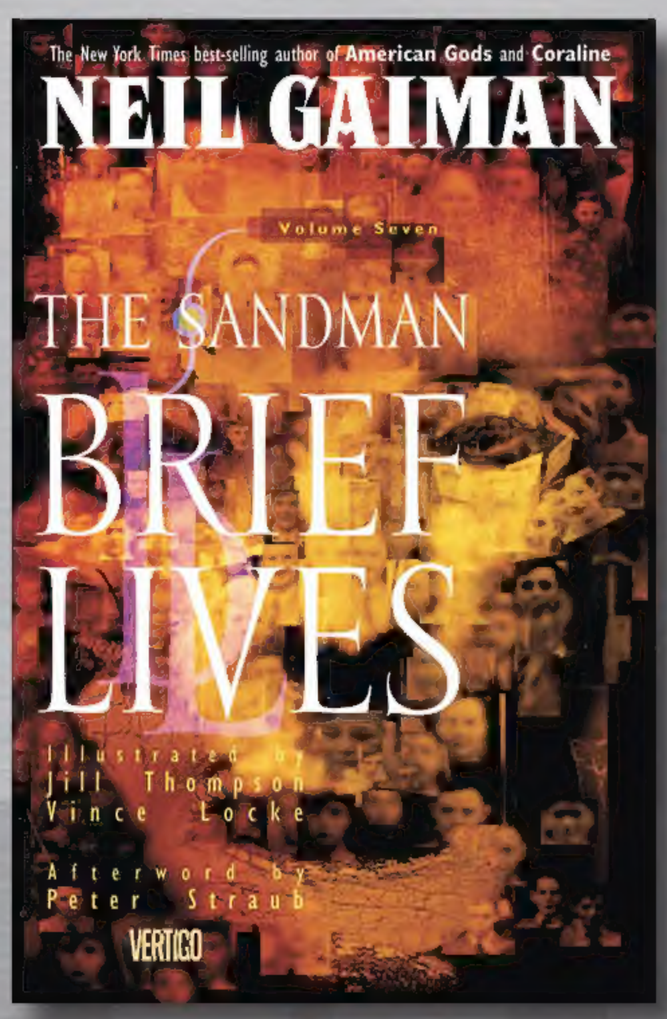


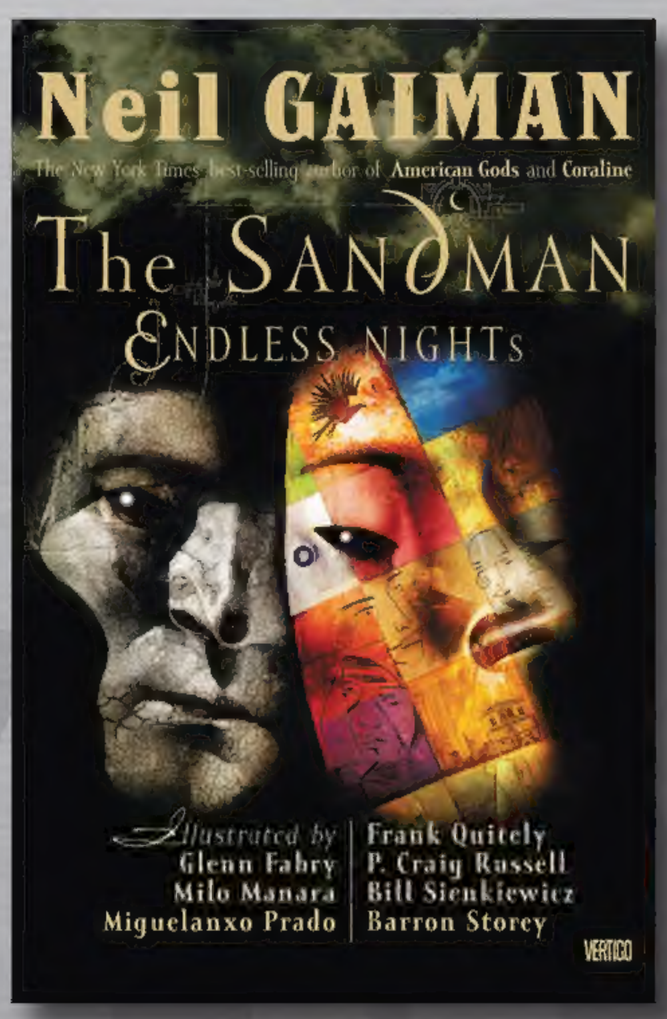
THE SANDMAN VOL. 4:
SEASON OF MISTS



THE SANDMAN VOL. 7:
BRIEF LIVES



THE SANDMAN:
ENDLESS NIGHTS



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